

THE URBAN BISHOPS COALITION
- A Backward Glance and a Forward Look -

Fifteen years ago in February 1977, fifteen bishops of the Episcopal Church who were serving in predominantly urban areas came together in Chicago for two days of theological reflection about the special crisis confronting most American cities and the seeming lack of priority concern in our Church for it. They were especially concerned that those urban programs of the Executive Council, initiated by the 1967 General Convention, had run their course and that nothing very much was being substituted, even though a Venture In Mission appeal was about to be launched.

Bishop Robert L. DeWitt recalls the experience: "They came from urban dioceses across the country, from St. Louis, Chicago, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Boston, Pittsburgh, New York, Baltimore, Roanoke, Newark, Cleveland, Washington, Trenton, Cincinnati. This meeting was their third. They had met for the first time at the General Convention in Minneapolis, drawn together by a common concern over the crisis of their cities, out of their belief that this plight should be in the center of the church's mission, and out of a need for each others' counsel.

"They spent all afternoon and evening in Chicago with Dr. Richard Barnet, political scientist from the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, and with Dr. John Bennett, former president of Union Seminary. They probed the economic and political realities of these apocalyptic days and the teachings of the Christian faith which drive them to face those realities.

"But the objective of these bishops is not easy to accomplish. They had hoped that the church's Venture in Mission program for raising upwards of \$ 100 million might be significantly related to the church's urban mission. But even though the Presiding Bishop met with them on this issue for a couple of hours the first morning, the administrative confusions of this fund-raising program made it very difficult to give, or get, any clear assurances."

In a letter addressed to John Allin, then the Presiding Bishop, they expressed their unanimous judgment that "our Church must give high priority to a pastoral, servant ministry in behalf of the people victimized by our deteriorating cities -- many of these people black, hispanic and poor -- and it must also give high priority to a Christian assault on the social systems and economic forces which have led us to create not the biblical image of the heavenly city but a reality that breeds crime, oppression, poverty and hopelessness."

In succeeding months, a general invitation was issued by those present to any other like-minded members of the House of Bishops to join them. Many did so and together they constituted themselves into what they came to call The Urban Bishops' Coalition. The Bishop of Washington, John Walker, agreed to be the first chairman. The Bishop of Ohio, John Burt, served as vice-chairman and treasurer. From the beginning the new U.B.C. understood the term "urban" as referring not narrowly to cities alone but to the entire urban culture that is shaping the nature and style of so much in America in this last quarter of the twentieth century. Thus,

bishops serving in predominantly rural areas were equally appropriate as members.

An initial and continuing function of the Coalition has been to help bishops themselves understand better the nature of the urban crisis through biblical eyes. Accordingly, an early project was staging a series of "North/South Institutes" at the College of Preachers and then annual economic seminars of one sort or another ever since -- including a full day for all bishops of the Church as part of the 1985 Interim Meeting in Jackson.

To avoid being entirely cerebral in their learning and to help others in the Church to become more sensitized to urban realities, an ambitious series of "public hearings" were organized and launched during 1977-78 in seven different cities across the land and in the Caribbean. Findings of the seven city hearings were shared with the whole church through a book, "To Hear and To Heed", published by Forward Movement in 1978 under the editorship of the Reverend Joseph Pelham.

Moving from education to social witness, frequent visits were made over the years to the Congress to lobby for remedial legislation designed to help the cities, often in company with their partners in the Full Employment Action Council. During the Carter Administration, this even included a U.B.C. session in the West Wing of the White House with Presidential staff. To broaden their impact on the entire Church, the Coalition helped to nurture into being the Episcopal Urban Caucus and many of its members (particularly Mellick Belshaw, Richard Trelease, Lyman Ogilby, Irving Mayson, Arthur Williams and Barbara Harris)) have sat on its board. The U.B.C. later helped design and promote Jubilee Ministries. It has lobbied successfully for an enlarged and more effective Washington Office for the Episcopal Church.

In 1982, the U.B.C. issued a Labor Day Pastoral, printed on the Op-Ed page of the New York TIMES and other papers across the land. In 1986 the first draft of a U.B.C. statement "The Economic Crisis and the American Conscience" was endorsed by the House of Bishops for study throughout the Church. During the following twelve months it was published in Jubilee Magazine, discussed and critiqued by The Province I Synod Conference, used by diocesan study groups and discussed in parochial adult forums, examined at a meeting of the Canadian House of Bishops, and included in the bibliography of the Center for Ethics and Public Policy. A completely revised document, now entitled "Economic Justice and the Christian Conscience", was personally endorsed by some 80 bishops in 1987 and was then commended (without dissenting vote) by the entire House. As preparations were made for the 1988 General Convention in Detroit, the U.B.C. collaborated with the Diocese of Michigan to draft a special plan of action for the entire Church based on the document. It was approved with "flying colors". Thus, "Taking Action for Economic Justice" (popularly called "the Michigan Plan") has now been operational as a national program of our Church for four years, guided by a special Convention-authorized national committee and the office of Ms. Gloria Brown at the Episcopal Church Center.

Membership in the Coalition has fluctuated from 55 to 83 members of the House. Currently, fifty-eight bishops have sent in their 1992 dues. Those dues, totaling thus far \$ 9,436, go to support a number of U.B.C. partner organizations, pay for the occasional Newsletters, underwrite conference expenses, and provide our volunteer chairman travel and hotel costs when he moves about on behalf of the Coalition.

Over the years, the U.B.C. has established collegial ties with a number of other movements in the social justice field, many of them ecumenical. In the past, these have included I-ECON (The Inter-religious Economic Crisis Organizing Network) headquartered at the Episcopal Church Center; "Under One Roof" which staged two large national conferences that brought together hundreds of Episcopalians, both clergy and lay, who are members of one or more Church "special interest" groups; the Religious Task Force of Mobilization for Survival, a U.B.C. link with the peace movement which stimulated a 1982 Disarmament Rally attended by 10,000 worshippers in New York's St. John the Divine and which sponsored the "Children of War" caravans that reached many U. S. cities; the National Religion and Labor Committee which brings together leaders in the Roman Catholic and "mainline" Protestant Churches who have special concern for working people; The Great Lakes Project on the Economic Crisis, a coalition of state councils of churches in the Upper Midwest where plant closings and unemployment have posed serious problems for millions; the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions (our chairman was a principal in its special study of "Corporate Responsibility for the Effects of Technological Change").

Today, the Urban Bishops Coalition maintains close liaison with other organizations and movements, many of them ecumenical, through which our concerns can be expressed more effectively than simply "going it alone":

(1) The Consultation, a coalition of thirteen social witness organizations within the Episcopal Church that have joined in common cause to influence legislation in progressive directions at meetings of the General Convention. Our chairman and Barbara Harris represent the Coalition on its board. Its coordinator, Joseph Pelham, has recently resigned and the search is on for a replacement.

(2) The Episcopal Urban Caucus, an association of both clergy and laypeople, national in scope, which meets annually to assess the current responsibility of our Church for social justice, with Canon Ed Rodman of Boston as its coordinator. Bishop Arthur Williams represents the Coalition on its Board. Its recent annual meetings have been in Camden (New Jersey) and Cincinnati. Its president, Diane Pollard, was succeeded this year by the Rev. Emmett Jarrett.

(3) ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) which regularly monitors, on behalf of the poor, the liquidation of failed "Savings and Loan" institutions that are presently under supervision of the government-appointed Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC). The current U.B.C. chairman is one of the co-chairs of its Financial Democracy Campaign which has won some spectacular victories from major banks for low-cost housing.

(4) The Church and City Conference, an annual consultation of parish clergy and some laity that convenes to wrestle with the challenges of urban parish life. Last year, meeting at Trinity Parish in New York City, when environmental problems were addressed, our chairman was one of the principal speakers.

(5) The Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, promoting social responsibility among U.S. corporations operating plants along the U. S. border in Mexico. With offices in the InterChurch Center, New York, the current chair of this enterprise is Sister Susan Mika OSB.

(6) The Religious Committee for Workplace Fairness, a movement closely affiliated with the AFL-CIO which labored, unsuccessfully (alas), for passage of Senate bill # 55 -- a measure endorsed by the Executive Council which would have banned the permanent replacement by corporate employers of workers out on strike. The U.B.C. drafted and successfully lobbied support for S.B. #55 through Executive Council to put our Church on record in support of this legislation.

(7) The Center for Theology and Public Policy in Washington, D.C. Among U.B.C. supporters are Bishops Burt, Ted Jones and Bill Jones, David Lewis, Spofford, Tennis, Vache, Appleyard, Birney, Bill Clark, Gosnell, McAllister, and Vogel.

During the year just past, the Coalition has also assisted the World Council of Churches as it goes about crafting an ecumenical statement on economic life from a global perspective. Among the three American commentaries on this issue being used: The U.B.C. paper, "Economic Justice and the Christian Conscience."

The U.B.C. also promoted (with financial encouragement from Trinity Church, Wall Street in New York) "The March of the Mayors" on Washington last May 16 under the banner, "Save Our Children; Save Our Cities." U.B.C. member Paul Moore Jr. was one of the MC's during a program on the Washington Mall.

Earlier this year and through its chairman, a fresh look was taken at "Genetics, Ethics and Religion" during a three day interfaith conference at the Texas Medical Center where the Archbishop of York was a major speaker.

Currently in process (and not yet ready for public review) is the crafting of an ecumenical church-sponsored design for a "Domestic Marshall Plan" as a partial response to the Los Angeles riots. Several from the U.B.C., including the chairman, are actively involved.

John H. Burt
Chair, Urban Bishops Coalition

September 1, 1992